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Review: Robin Archer, Why is there no Labor Party in the United States?

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Abstract

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Robin Archer, *Why is there no Labor Party in the United States?*

(Princeton University Press, 2007)

Gregory Melleuish¹

The decade of the 1890s saw the establishment of a labour party in Australia and the failure of a similar type of political party to emerge in the United States. In many ways, the existence or otherwise of a labour party is emblematic of the difference between the political culture of Australia, Britain and New Zealand and that of the United States, although it could be argued that it is less fundamental than the contrast between the Westminster system and the American emphasis on the rigid separation of powers.

Robin Archer addresses a fundamental question — Why is there no Labor party in America? — through a comparison of late-nineteenth century Australia and the United States. He believes that this is not an easy question to answer. He rejects what might be called essentialist arguments based on a notion of American exceptionalism, preferring instead to test a number of possible concrete reasons that might explain why America did not establish a political party based on Labour and the trade unions.

Archer's method is to compare America and Australia in the late-nineteenth century over a number of areas relating to labour politics. His basic assumption is that America and Australia were very similar societies: both were settler societies; both advocated liberty and democracy. As Australia did develop a labour party and America did not, then a comparison between the two should establish not only what they had in common but also where there were crucial differences. It is these differences that should provide the answer as to why America did not take the Labour party path.

Archer goes through a number of factors that have been traditionally used to explain the absence of a labour party in America. These include the presence of racism amongst American workers, the prevalence of liberal values, and institutional matters such as elections and the nature of the constitution. Using Australia as a comparison, he points out that such factors also operated in an Australia that saw the birth of a labour party.

He considers three factors as significant because there were considerable differences between America and Australia. These are:

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- The level of repression in America
- The importance of religious factors
- The more dogmatic socialist position taken by some in the American labour movement.

But, as Archer points out, a consideration of these factors only takes the investigation to the next level. Why was it the case that that American labour groups were more dogmatic in their socialism; why were the Americans more prone to violent repression, and why were religious issues more important in America than Australia?

This comes back to the whole issue of the different political history of the two countries. Australia and America are not as alike as Archer would like us to believe. There are some differences that complicate comparisons. The first is that America, as an English settlement, began life in the early seventeenth century while the Australian colonies had a much shorter history. Australia commenced life as a penal colony in 1788 but it was not really until the 1850s, and the gold rushes, that the colonies became viable entities. In the 1890s most colonial leaders in Australia were either immigrants or the children of primarily British immigrants

By the 1890s America was a vast, complex country that had undergone a civil war while the Australian colonies were small both in number and population. While America had shared with *pre-modern* England a rather violent heritage that had led to what Kevin Phillips² has termed 'the Cousins' wars' — the English Civil War, the American Revolution and the American Civil War — the Australian colonies shared with *modern* Britain a nineteenth-century desire to be respectable.

By the 1890s the two countries had undergone different experiences and possessed quite distinctive cultures. While they had much in common, they were also different and one should be cautious about any sort of mechanical comparison. Particular histories are important in such matters.

Consider the issue of religion, which Archer links to that of political parties. Americans had a deep religious identity and this identity was related to their political party identification. Being a Republican or a Democrat mattered for many Americans. This, according to Archer, impeded their willingness to move from being members of trade unions to using the trade union as the basis of a political party. In Australia, religious identity in relation to politics was relatively weak, except in the particular case of Catholicism, where religious and ethnic identities were tied together. There was a tendency for Catholics to identify with Protectionist economic policies, but, as the case of Patrick Glynn indicates, one could be both a free-trader and a Catholic. In the early 1890s Labour did not

² Phillips, K. 2007, *The Cousins' Wars: Religion, Politics and the Triumph of Anglo-America*, Basic Books.

have a definite view on the fiscal question and the early W. M. Hughes was a free-trader.

In 1890, political parties — and hence identification with a particular political party — were relatively new in Australia. After the 1850s, conservatism had been routed and nearly everyone had become a liberal. The safe course of action for a conservative politician was to take the label 'liberal conservative'. Only in the 1880s did new lines of demarcation begin to be drawn again within liberalism. When a political labour movement came along in the early 1890s parties were not very strong and party identification was weak. Politicians still believed in an ideal of independence, as expressed in the trustee theory of representation. It took the presence of a labour party to make that identification much stronger as the new labour parties adopted a model of democracy based on the delegate model of representation that allowed for greater control of politicians.

This contrasts with the American situation, where there was a long history of party identification going back to the early days of the republic and strengthened by a civil war. A new party would need to fight to get into the American political arena, whereas in Australia the labour party came in on the ground floor. By the early twentieth century, the Australian party system had begun to assume a much greater rigidity.

The case of repression also indicates a major difference between Australia and America. Australian political culture was much more sedate than its American counterpart, and was less open to political violence. In part, this went back to the 1850s and the need for a former convict society to demonstrate to a doubting British public that it was worthy of the political freedom that it had been granted. In part, it reflected the workings of the 'Australian' secret ballot, which dampened down political conflict during elections. During the Victorian political crisis of 1879–80 C. H. Pearson complained about how docile the Victorian population was in the face of what he saw as a threat to democracy. He argued that they should become more activist in their politics. David Malouf has argued that Australians received the English culture of the late Enlightenment, which helped Australians to become queue-formers rather than queue-jumpers. Only the presence of Chinese immigrants appeared to bring out the darker side of Australians.

Archer also points out that a crucial difference between Australia and America was the different role of the courts vis-à-vis the legislature. As heirs to the Westminster system the Australian colonists tended to rely more on Parliament to change the law than on the courts. This made the legislature a greater prize to capture in Australia as a means of defending individual interests.

The place of the courts and an emphasis on human rights in American culture might also help to explain why American labour leaders were also more prone to moving towards abstract socialist dogmas. Americans were influenced by

Reformation Protestantism, which emphasised rules and covenants. Scottish philosophy had a big impact on American universities. The Scots were much more rationalist than the English. Anglicanism, based on the Book of Common Prayer and a measure of pragmatism, was far more influential in Australia. In this regard, Australians resembled the English far more than their American cousins.

In the final analysis it might be no more than a matter of timing that explains why America has no labour party while a labour party in Australia stands at the centre of the Australian political system. It is always a battle for a new political party to emerge in an established political system. In Britain it took decades for the Labour Party to establish itself properly as one of the two major parties. Even then the displaced Liberal Party has managed to survive in different guises down to the present day. In Australia, Labour did not have to fight against long-standing established political parties. It was a foundation member of the Australian political system.